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16 Meriden Road
Rockfall
Connecticut 06481-2961
Tele: 860-346-TREE
www.ctwoodlands.org

Testimony of Eric Hammerling, Executive Director, Connecticut Forest & Park Association

Public Hearing Subject Matter	Position
Raised HB 5291: AN ACT AUTHORIZING BONDING FOR BIKEWAYS, GREENWAYS AND RECREATIONAL TRAILS.	Support
Raised SB 238: AAC REVISIONS TO CERTAIN ENVIRONMENT RELATED STATUTES.	Support sections 7-9
Raised HB 5290: AN ACT PROHIBITING ACCESS TO STATE PARKS AND FORESTS FOR CERTAIN CONDUCT.	Support
Raised SB 243: AAC CLIMATE-SMART AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES.	Support

The Connecticut Forest & Park Association (CFPA) is the first nonprofit conservation organization established in Connecticut in 1895. For over 127 years, CFPA has offered testimony before the General Assembly on various State Park and Forest, trail recreation, sustainable forestry, and land conservation issues.

HB 5291: I want to thank the Committee for raising HB 5291 which would increase the bond authorization for the Recreational Trails & Greenways Grants program to \$6 million. The amount recommended in this bill is consistent with the bonding level of \$3 million/year for recreational trails recommended in both the proposed Governor's Biennial Budget for FY 2022 – 2023 and proposed Adjustments for FY 2023.

People want trails and are using trails more than ever

Statewide public opinion survey responses, conducted as part of Connecticut's State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) for 2017-2022, have ranked recreational trails at the very top of community assets and needs for the future. This is consistent with the findings in previous SCORP reviews of public interest.

According to the UConn CT Trails Census, in 2020, trail use increased by an estimated 38% overall when compared to 2019. However, more than half of the trails included in the Census recorded increased visitation of 68% or greater. Similarly, attendance at State Parks, Forests, and Wildlife Management Areas has been booming, and we expect this high outdoor recreation involvement to continue.

Trails bring economic activity and other benefits to communities

In 2020, outdoor recreation in Connecticut contributed \$3.3 billion to our GDP and supported over 41,000 Connecticut jobs ([U.S Dept of Commerce: ORSA](#)). Much of this outdoor recreation was associated with using trails. According to the Connecticut Trail Census at UConn, recreational trails provide many benefits to communities (following are links to summaries of trail benefits from the CT Trail Census):

- [Trails promote health](#)
- [Trails support economies](#)
- [Trails build communities](#)
- [Trails enhance resiliency](#)

There is significant ongoing need for trails funding

In Fall, 2021, DEEP issued a request for recreational trails proposals with only \$3 million available and received an unprecedented 65 applications requesting over \$22 million. The \$3 million was granted to twenty worthy projects, but another \$7 million in highly ranked proposals were unable to be funded. We expect the ongoing need for investments in Connecticut's outdoor recreation infrastructure to continue.

Trails are an important investment for the future

Trails are one of the best ways that bond funds can be invested. Recreational trails for hiking, running, biking, equestrian, and other uses attract and sustain families and businesses, create healthy communities, and foster a high quality of life. Trails should be an ongoing priority for state-level investment.

SB 238, Sections 7-9: CFPA advocated for the passage of the Forest Practices Act in 1991, and this law is critical to ensure the forest practitioners who work in Connecticut are professionally licensed, meet ongoing continuing education requirements, and adhere to important forest practice standards that protect natural resources.

The Forest Practices Advisory Board, which oversees the implementation of the Forest Practices Act, has requested the inclusion of Sections 7 – 9 in legislation for the past few years. These sections are important to clarify appointment authority for FPAB members, make administrative improvements in the license renewal process for forest practitioners, and reduce unnecessary administrative paperwork requirements related to continuing education credits. We see all of the changes recommended in Sections 7 – 9 as important to support streamlined operations of the Forest Practices program. CFPA also supports Sections 5 and 6 of SB 238 that facilitate Connecticut's ability to engage in mutual aid with New England states and nearby Canadian provinces to combat forest fires in the northeast region.

HB 5290: State Park attendance has grown by ~10%/year each of the past 4 years. While swelling State Park attendance has been a tremendous benefit for Connecticut overall, the number of full-time and seasonal workers available to maintain and operate State Parks and campgrounds has remained flat after declining precipitously for years. DEEP's field staff are already at their limit to be able to provide safe, well-maintained Parks for the public. In addition, DEEP has too few environmental conservation officers to respond quickly to increased infractions.

At the same time, State Park workers have noted a proportional increase in unlawful behavior by some park visitors including defacing state property, destruction of natural resources and direct assaults and/or threats on Park employees as well as other visitors. This increase in unlawful behavior draws resources away from "normal" Park and Campground operations and impacts the ability of other visitors to have a safe and enjoyable experience.

Current law allows DEEP to evict an unlawful individual for up to one year, but only after issuance of a park or forest infraction and conviction by a court. Unfortunately, we understand that these kinds of infractions may often be dismissed by courts and are not acting as an effective deterrent to unlawful behavior. This is a complicated issue, because ensuring due process for potential violators is important, and in most instances, we would prefer to see violent behavior and vandalism handled by law enforcement and through typical judicial proceedings.

We are supportive of this concept and keeping Park employees and visitors safe, but at the same time we would like to see more data on this issue to better define the scope of this problem, and understand the resources that DEEP would need to dedicate to this effort to respond effectively.

SB 243

Farms, forests, and other natural and working lands perform a valuable function in sequestering and storing greenhouse gases to mitigate climate change. At the same time, due to our changing climate, farmers will have to adapt to ensure both a resilient food system and sustain many ecosystem and other benefits for Connecticut's future.

This important bill would enable the Department of Agriculture's Farmland Restoration Grant Program to respond directly to the challenge of climate change by supporting farmers who implement "climate-smart agricultural and forestry practices." This bill is consistent with recommendations identified through the Governor's Council on Climate Change, as well as priorities identified in the Governor's Executive Order (3-21).

Thank you for the important work you do, and for the opportunity to testify today on these bills.